

Jewel Mysteries—From a Dealer's Notebook

BY MAX PEMBERTON
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The man stood upon the weir-bridge watching me, a conspicuous man with strange clothes for river work upon him, and a haunting activity which drove him, from the lock to the inn, and again from the inn to the lock, with a crazy restlessness which was maddening. I had been for some hours whipping the mill-stream, which lies over against the lockhouse at Pangbourne; but meeting with no success amongst the chub, which on this particular July evening were aggressively indifferent even to the succulent frog, I pointed to the bushes in the open river; and there lit my pipe and fell to speculation upon him who favored me with so close an attention. I said that he was a very conspicuous man, and to this I owed it that I had seen him. He wore the straw hat of Jesus college, Cambridge, and a velvet coat which shone brown and greasy in the falling sunlight; but his legs were encased in salmon-pink riding breeches, and he had brown boots reaching to his knees. Beyond this, he was singularly handsome, so far as I could judge with the river's breadth between us; and his hair was fair, with a rich golden gleam, which looked for in one who has grown to manhood. Why he watched me so closely I could not even conjecture, but the fact was not to be disputed. I had lain by the mill since the forenoon, and since the forenoon he had hugged to the weir-bridge or to the lockhouse, giving no attention to the score of small boats and launches which passed up or down to Goring or Mappledurham; or even to the many pretty women who basked upon the cushions of puns or cat-boats. I alone was the object of his gaze, and for me he seemed to wait through the afternoon and until the twilight.

Now, had the man hailed me, I should have gone forward at once, for my curiosity had been piqued by his attention until it waxed warm and harassing; but this he did not do; keeping his eyes upon me even when I had rested from the casting and sat idling in the punt. It would have been easy, I concede, to have gone up river toward Goring and go to have avoided the chance of explanation, and have left ungratified my desire to know who he was, and wherefrom came his harassing interest in my failure to ensnare the exasperating chub. So I sat there, in turn wondering if he were honest or a rogue, an adventurer or an idler, a river man or a fop from Piccadilly. And as the problem was beyond me, I left it at last, and taking up my punt pole I gave three or four vigorous thrusts which sent me immediately in the landing stage of the Swan Inn, and thence to my room.

It may be urged that this was an indifferent way of dealing with the man in the velvet coat; if I wished to know more of him, but I had taken that little parlor of the inn which puts out upon the hard of the boat-house; and I could see from an open window both the panorama of the lock and that of the open reach away towards the islands. It was now close upon the hour of seven, and the most part of the river lay in cooling shadow. I could hear by no means inharmonious music floating over the water from a girl's guitar; there were several launches waiting for the lock gates; and I recall well the face of a very remarkable woman, who presently came to the landing stage in a gig, the cushions of which were of an aggressive yellow, but one which was a striking contrast to her black hair and ivory-white skin. Quite apart, however, from her indisputable beauty, I had reason to watch this conspicuous cars-woman, for no sooner had she come to the landing stage than the man in the velvet coat went to her assistance, and taking a number of bags and baskets from the boat, accompanied her into the village high street, and so carried her from my view.

Here then, thought I, is the end of my mystery. The man has been waiting for the return of his wife, when I, with ostentatious composure, played my self that he had been looking to speak with me. What creature of ideas we are. And when I reflected upon it, certainly it was monstrous absurd to think that man should wish to watch another failing to catch fish through a long summer's afternoon. Indeed, I laughed heartily at myself as the maid set my dinner, and I put my eyes and feet upon the piano (one note everything upon the piano in Thames village) before during the very substantial, if rural, repast served to me.

One dines up river, as most people do, in some quiet state. Loafers, loafers, fruit-sellers, boatmen, and these congregate near the open window, and discuss verbally the dishes which the diner discusses more substantially. Custom so states us that this publicity in no way lessens the pleasure. I have so long learned to tolerate the presence before my easement of oarsmen, peddlers, and even the less welcome harpist, that these now are for me the matter of the evening. I am writing, the crowd was less than usual, being composed of one vendor of fruit, three men in obviously cheapish blazers, and an old woman who sold bonnets. I discussed the weather with me through the open window at one and the same time. She was such a merry old soul, and gave me so much of her history and of that of her son, who was fighting for his quare and country, that I forgot the ridiculous romance of the velvet-coated man, and even his presence, until of a sudden he presented himself, but standing at the easement, and asking to be admitted.

"I'm most horribly sorry," said he, "to intrude upon you at your dinner, but my train leaves for town in ten minutes, and upon something which you tell me you know more about than any man in England."

"By all means," said I. "But your estimate of my opinion is hopelessly flattering; it concerns jewels, I suppose?"

"Exactly," said he; "and I shall be under very large obligations to you if you will tell me whether two emeralds I have in my pocket are of any value, and if so, where would be the best place to dispose of them?"

He took a little paper box from his coat, and laid it near to my plate. I saw that it was a box which had contained tabloids of nitro-glycerine (a drug prescribed for diseases of the heart); and that it had been sold by a chemist of the name of Benjamin Wain, whose shop was in the High Street at Reading. These things I observed with my intuitive habit of grasping detail, learnt in long contention with rogues; and then forgot them as the man opened a screw of tissue paper, and I beheld two of the finest emeralds I have seen during my career. The stones were perfectly matched, of a rich velvety, but brilliant color, and came, I did not doubt after my first sight of them, from the Upper Grinoco or from Columbia. Their weight I judged to be about five carats each, and I knew that a

without flaw, which very few emeralds are, they would be worth fifteen hundred pounds at a very low estimate. All this passed through my mind like a flash; but with admiration of the gem, which brought covetousness in its path, there came at once the other thought—what is this man doing here with these stones, and how comes it that he can carry them and yet be unconscious of their value? But this I endeavored to conceal, and waited for him to speak.

"Well," said he, after a pause, "do you find much the matter with them?"

"I should want my glass to see," said I with caution; "the light is failing, and my eyes are not as good as they were."

"You mean a magnifying glass, I suppose," said he, producing one from his pocket. "Well, I happen to have one."

Why it was I cannot tell you, but this trifling circumstance I marked down in my mind as my first and only ground of suspicion against him. Perhaps I coupled it with that spontaneous distrust which I felt when first he spoke, for the very softness of his voice was obviously assumed, and now that I saw him near, I did not fail to notice that the velvet coat was much worn, and the rowing club tie he wore frayed beyond respectability. But I took his lens, and having examined the stones long and critically under it, I found them to be without flaw or blemish. Then I gave him my opinion.

"They are fine stuff," said I; "do you happen to know where they come from?"

"I looked him full in the face when I spoke, and observed a slight drawing of the lines above his mouth. When he answered me I was sure that he had thought out a lie—and with effort."

"I believe they come from Salazar," he stammered; "at least I have heard so."

"That could not possibly be," said I; "the worst emeralds we have are the best product of that mine. I fancy they are from Venezuela."

"Ah, that is the place," said he, "I remember it now; but I've a wretched head for geography."

While he said this the train to London steamed out of the railway station, which is not a stone's throw from the inn, and he, forgetful of his tale to me, sat watching it unconcernedly. I had discovered him in a second lie, and I waited to entrap him to a third with the practiced pleasure of a cross-examiner.

"Do you sell these stones for yourself or as an agent?" I asked, assuming some authority as I felt sure of him. His hesitation in answering was merely momentary, but it was enough for my purposes.

"For myself," said he; and then with clumsy maladroitness he added, "They were left to me by my father, and I have never had the heart to offer them to any one. I'll tell you what, though, if you'll give me a thousand pounds for the pair, you shall keep them."

"That's a long price," said I, "and if you don't mind the suggestion, my dinner's getting cold."

I had spoken thus with the design of putting him off; but he was undisturbedly an ill-bred man, and I saw that I could have bought the emeralds from him for five hundred pounds. My hint—if such you could call it—fell upon deaf ears, and he seemed not to hear it, continued to argue-bargain, but betraying himself in every word he said.

"Come, now," he cried, "you don't want to be hard upon me; give me a check for five hundred and send the balance to Brighton in a week if you find them as good as you think. That's a fair offer, isn't it?"

"The offer is fair enough," said I, "but you forget that I did not come here to buy emeralds, I am in Pangbourne to catch chub, as you saw this afternoon."

"I'm afraid I can't agree to that," he replied with a laugh; "I did not see you catch chub this afternoon—I saw you miss three pretty ones."

"The bait is poor," I said meaningly; "fish are as canny as men, and don't take pretty things if they think there's a hook in them."

"I gave him with such a stare that he rose suddenly from his chair, and having made a bungling parry of his jewels, went off by himself. He had to pass my window as he left the inn, and as he crossed the road I caught him in, saying:

"You'll be losing your train to London."

"Be d—d to that!" said he; and with such a salute he turned the angle of the road, and I lost sight of him.

But I thought much of his emeralds (which I figured both in my walk across the old wooden bridge to Warden church, when the river lay dark and gloomy with the song of the breeze in the reeds and sedge-grass; and again as I lay in the old wooden "nest" of the inn, and contemplated the "sampler" which bore witness to the energy of one Jane Atkins, whose work it was. By what chance had the man found me out? Whence came his ready clothes and his jewels? Who was the pretty woman who had come up from the hard with him? He had come by the stones fraudulently, of course; had the case been different he would have sent them to London to be sold for their true value, and there got his price for them; and I thought of the lay upon me to advise the police in Reading of the offer I had received; at another there came some regret for his departure; and at the manner of his emeralds, I could have sold the pair for a small profit, and as my greed told me, I could have bought them cheap. At the end of it I felt asleep in an emerald boat, and went away with emerald eyes steered me abominably.

On the next day, quite early in the morning, I set out in a dogcart for Reading, and for the first time in my life I went to the Kennel's mouth, whence we were to start for a day's sport upon that fish-breeding river. My dog took me by the old Bathroad, and I might not carry her dog very far; but I had not gone very far upon the Reading road before I saw the handsome woman—the wife, I assumed, of the velvet-coated man—carrying a heavy bag, and toward the biscuit town. At this point the sun beat early upon the sandy way with a shimmer of white and misty light, which might not carry her dog very far; but I did not doubt that walking was a great labor. Yet, when I reined in the dog, and asked the woman if at least I might not carry her, she thanked me somewhat curtly. I thought, and evidently resented any notice of her difficulty. It occurred to me, as I drove on, that the man, who had been with her on the previous day, had really left her by the last train for London; but when I came into Reading, and was about to cross the High Street, to reach Earlsleigh, I saw the name Benjamin Wain super-scribed above a little shop in the shop, and I stood at once. I knew that a

country tradesman will gossip like a fishwife, and I asked the man for some preparation which he could not possibly find in the pharmacopoeia, and so began to feel my ground.

"You're well ahead of the times here," said I, looking at his show-case, which was woefully destitute of drugs. "I shouldn't have thought that could be asked for tabloids in a place like Reading."

"Oh, but we are," said he, readily. "It's a wonderfully advanced town. Reading—you won't get much in Regent Street which is no here. I've tried in loading all my life—and seen changes, sir, indeed I have."

"You know most of the people then," said I, with a purpose.

"Ay," said he, "I've born and buried a man, and I've seen a lot of children grow to men and women, and men and women grow to children—you wouldn't think it, perhaps?"

"No," said I, "you don't show it; but your reputation, if I may say so, goes beyond this place. I was in Pangbourne yesterday, where a tall, yellow-haired man was speaking of you; who is he, I wonder?"

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the wooden gate of the drive was broken down, and the garden land beyond it nothing but a tangle of swaying grass, thistle and undergrowth, preparing one for poor things to come; but the house itself was a massive and roomy grand attempt at a towered and buttressed structure, built in stout stone with Norman windows, and the pretense of a keep, which gave strength to its air of antiquity. When I came near to it, I saw that many of the gables had fallen from the roof of the left wing, which seemed to be unfinished, and the parapet was broken away and decaying above the porch; while—and this was even more singular—there did not seem a single curtain to the house. It was now upon the hour of seven, and a glimmer of sunlight shined redly upon the latticed casements lit up the facade with a greater brilliance than one looks to see out of Italy. There were roots creeling and caving in the great elms by the moat which ran round three sides of the house; I could hear the baying of a hound in the courtyard by the stables—both of man or woman I saw nothing, though I rang

you have done with it straight off?"

"Yes," said I, leaning over from the dogcart to spare my voice. "Do you know a tall man with yellow hair who's got two emeralds to sell?"

As these words his face whitened in the sunlight, and he opened his great mouth to speak, but no sound came. Then quickly he drew a small box from his pocket, such as I had seen in the hands of the velvet-coated man, and took a tabloid from it.

"He did not wait for me to answer, but led the way up bare stone steps to a landing, off which there led two passages, and in a big and comfortable bedroom he showed me three faces, one a little one, which he opened, and took therefrom a case containing seven emeralds of a size and quality apparently similar to the ones I had seen at Pangbourne. But two I had seen at Pangbourne. But when he gave them to me, I examined each of once that five of them were genuine and two were false."

"Well," said he, after I had looked at them long and closely, "how do you like them?"

"I like them enough," said I; "at least, like five of them, but the other two are glass."

At this he cried, "Oh, my God!" and clutched the stones from me, with the clenching fingers of a madman. When he had seen them for himself—being judge enough to follow me in my conclusions—he began to roar out oaths and complaints most pitifully, cursing his nephew as I have never heard of again, and before he spoke, in my endeavor to calm him, I asked how it could possibly be that this fellow he feared had got access to an inheritance, but he poured out only an incoherent tale, begging me to send for his nephew, and not to leave him, then falling to prophesy, and declaring that he would be murdered before the month was out. It was altogether the most moving sight I have ever seen, pointing strongly to the conclusion that his man was mad; and, in fact, where his jewels were concerned, sanity was not his strong point.

By and by he got sufficient reason to tell me that he had the administration of some of his nephew's property, and that in his work he had first fallen foul of a man, headstrong, vindictive, by no means honest, and in some moods, dangerous. Yet, even knowing his relative's character and the threats he had urged against him, he could not tell how the safe was broken, or by what means the emeralds had gone. He was not even aware that his nephew was in England, and I had been the first to bring intelligence of his coming. I asked him, naturally, if these seven stones represented the whole of his loss, and at that he fell off again to his raving, but took two keys of the larger safes from a secret drawer in the smaller, and I could see and began to peer upon the faded bed-covers a wealth of treasure which might have bought a city. Here were rubies of infinite perfection, diamonds set in a hundred shapes, ropes of pearls, known eastern, rings of every number, signet rings, necklaces—in short, such a stupendous show that the dark and dingy bedroom was lighted with wondrous light, a myriad rays flashing up from the bed, and the whole place seemed touched with a wand, and changed to a chamber of a thousand colors. Before the bed of jewels the old man stood chattering and moaning; now bathing as it were, in the gems, now letting him ripple over his hands, or addressing tender endearments to them, or clutching them with nervous avidity, as though he feared even my companionship.

In the midst of this strange scene, and while I was holding the spell-bound by the wondrous vision of wealth, a sudden exclamation drew the miser from his employment. It came from the girl who had been sent to the village, she now standing in the doorway of the bedroom, and crying, "O good Lord!" as she saw the glitter of the gems. But Ladd turned upon her at the words, and grasped her by the wrists, crying out as he had cried when first he knew that he was robbed.

"You hussy," he hissed, bending her by the arms backward almost to the floor; "what do you watch me for? What do you mean by coming here? Where are the emeralds you have stolen? Tell me, wench, do you hear? Tell me, or I shall but you really!"

He held her in so firm a grasp that I feared she would swoon, and went to pull him off, at which action he turned to cry out against me; but the anger had played upon him so that he flung suddenly all across the bed, and, being shattered, he kindled a common paraffin lamp, which might have set all this, but would have been dear at two.

"I'll be getting the port," said he, casting a wistful glance at me, hoping perhaps that I should decline his invitation to a glass; "you'll not mind refreshing after your drive?"

"Thanks, you may be sure I won't," said I, and while he was gone, I turned down the passage, and saw that his dining room had once been a fine apartment, oak-paneled and spacious; and that ancestors, whose rubicund jowls spoke of "two-bottle" men, now seemed to survive the economy below with agony unspeakable. For the rest, there was little in the room but a broken Victorian chair in mahogany, and a piano with a high back, such as our grandmothers played upon.

When Ladd came back he had a bottle in his hand. I smiled openly when I saw that it was a pint; but he decanted it with a fine show of generosity, and pushing a glass to me, took up the matter which interested him at once.

"Where did you see my nephew?" he asked, while I sipped the wine with unsatisfied curiosity, as it had been in London, perhaps?"

"I saw him—if he was your nephew—at Pangbourne last night," said I; "he had a pretty woman with him, and wanted to sell me two emeralds."

"That must have been the wife he married in San Francisco," cried he; "but she has no surname; you didn't hear that I paid his passage abroad last spring after he'd robbed me of a thousand? Well, and it was emeralds he wanted to sell you?"

"Two of the finest I have ever seen,"

After that he threw the stable door wide open, and dressed only, as I could see, in a loose dressing-gown, and a pair of carpet slippers, he led the horse to a stall that had half of a roof, crying to the maid to get her down to the house of a man he named, there to be a feed of corn and the loan of a boy. But while he was doing it, he shivered incessantly, and seemed eaten up with fear.

"You appear to think that I'm putting up with you," said I, when I heard his orders; "there's no need to look after the nag—I shan't be here ten minutes."

"Not ten minutes!" he exclaimed, still with quivering voice. "Oh, but you will—when you've heard my talk. Would you see me murdered?"

I did not answer, being in the main amused at his attempts to get the horse out of the trap, and particularly to unblock the very stiff belly-band. The girl had gone tripping off with herself to the village, as I thought; but though at that time I had no intention of staying beyond an hour with him, I unshook the animal myself, and tethered the beast to the rickety manger, throwing my own rug across his loins; then I followed Ladd through a black and smoke-washed kitchen to a dingy apartment near the hall, and the place I'll run up with it; the housekeeper's always such.

He seemed to think that all this was a good joke, and wondered, I doubt not, that I did not simmer at her again. I was on the very point of whipping up the nag and leaving such a curious household, when one of the landing windows went up with a creak, and Ladd himself, with a muffled round his throat, was visible.

"What d'ye want in my grounds?" he roared. "Here, you hussy, what are you chattering there for?—thought I was asleep did you say—ha!"

"Good evening, Mr. Ladd," said I, quietly; "I'm sorry, but I appear to have disturbed you. I've a word for you to say, if you'll come down."

"Hullo," cried he, in his cracked and piercing voice; "why, it's you, is it? I thought you were the butcher! What's your business?—I'm biding in bed, as you can see."

"I can't see," said I, "and my business is private."

"Won't it wait?" he snarled. "You haven't come to sell me anything?"

"I don't sell stuff in the street," said I. "Come down, and I'll talk to you. But if you don't want to hear—well, go to bed."

His curiosity got the better of him at this point, and he snapped out the words, "I'm coming down," and then disappeared from the window. But he had no intention of opening the front door, as I found presently, when of a sudden he appeared at a casement upon the ground floor, and resumed the conversation.

"You're not asking after my health," said he, "but I'll let you know that I'm eat up with cold; can



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"I like them enough," said I; "at least, like five of them, but the other two are glass."

At this he cried, "Oh, my God!" and clutched the stones from me, with the clenching fingers of a madman. When he had seen them for himself—being judge enough to follow me in my conclusions—he began to roar out oaths and complaints most pitifully, cursing his nephew as I have never heard of again, and before he spoke, in my endeavor to calm him, I asked how it could possibly be that this fellow he feared had got access to an inheritance, but he poured out only an incoherent tale, begging me to send for his nephew, and not to leave him, then falling to prophesy, and declaring that he would be murdered before the month was out. It was altogether the most moving sight I have ever seen, pointing strongly to the conclusion that his man was mad; and, in fact, where his jewels were concerned, sanity was not his strong point.

By and by he got sufficient reason to tell me that he had the administration of some of his nephew's property, and that in his work he had first fallen foul of a man, headstrong, vindictive, by no means honest, and in some moods, dangerous. Yet, even knowing his relative's character and the threats he had urged against him, he could not tell how the safe was broken, or by what means the emeralds had gone. He was not even aware that his nephew was in England, and I had been the first to bring intelligence of his coming. I asked him, naturally, if these seven stones represented the whole of his loss, and at that he fell off again to his raving, but took two keys of the larger safes from a secret drawer in the smaller, and I could see and began to peer upon the faded bed-covers a wealth of treasure which might have bought a city. Here were rubies of infinite perfection, diamonds set in a hundred shapes, ropes of pearls, known eastern, rings of every number, signet rings, necklaces—in short, such a stupendous show that the dark and dingy bedroom was lighted with wondrous light, a myriad rays flashing up from the bed, and the whole place seemed touched with a wand, and changed to a chamber of a thousand colors. Before the bed of jewels the old man stood chattering and moaning; now bathing as it were, in the gems, now letting him ripple over his hands, or addressing tender endearments to them, or clutching them with nervous avidity, as though he feared even my companionship.

In the midst of this strange scene, and while I was holding the spell-bound by the wondrous vision of wealth, a sudden exclamation drew the miser from his employment. It came from the girl who had been sent to the village, she now standing in the doorway of the bedroom, and crying, "O good Lord!" as she saw the glitter of the gems. But Ladd turned upon her at the words, and grasped her by the wrists, crying out as he had cried when first he knew that he was robbed.

"You hussy," he hissed, bending her by the